What should the role of parent councils be?

Leithwood, Jantzi& Steinbach (1998), in a paper detailing results of two stages of a three stage study in Ontario schools, set out to answer the question as to whether or not school councils matter. The purpose of the study was to ascertain whether the provincial mandated school councils were having an effect, and the nature of that effect, on schools and classrooms. The School Classroom Impact Survey was developed and distributed to approx. 3150 teachers in 95 elementary and 14 secondary schools within three Ontario school districts. Additionally, interviews were conducted with members of various councils.

In a brief overview of the existing research on the effectiveness of school councils - which included a range of positive and negative effects – the authors concluded that the prior research had shown no overwhelming evidence to support the notion that increased parent involvement through mandated school councils was having any impact on student achievement or classroom practices. The prior research also noted that the effectiveness of parent councils, in any respect, was dependent on the principals’ leadership and support, establishment of clear roles and guidelines for the councils and clear communication between councils, administration and staff.

The results of the first two stages indicated that teachers, overall, rated the influence of parent/school councils on their work within the classroom as very weak. Influence ratings were slightly higher for influence outside of the classroom based on the fundraising efforts, volunteering and general support parents were showing. Councils that were considered ‘effective’ were involved in schools where the school culture – lead by the principal – put a high value on the contributions of parents and where they were engaged in work that reflected the school goals.

In an analysis of the results the authors point out that the variation of value awarded to councils helps to explain the limited consequences that councils have had on school improvement, despite their mandated existence. They also conclude that even though the influence of councils on classroom practice has not been established, they are still worth pursuing as they create a positive influence – albeit, weak – by showing support for the work of teachers. The authors point out that the results of this study confirm the previous research’s argument that the success of council implementation has more to do with the school culture than a lack of skill on the part of the council members.The results also coincide with previous research showing that effective councils are well organized with clear roles and responsibilities and have effective communication between members and with the school staff. Finally, they confirm that principals’ leadership has an impact on council effectiveness by showing support for the contributions of the council and working in close conjunction with the council chair.

In answering the question, “Do school councils matter?” the authors make the distinction that effectiveness in the long run needs to be defined as improved student outcomes and effectiveness in the short run needs to be defined as changes in classroom practice. Based on those definitions, previous research and the study results – the answer is ‘no’. Can the existence of school councils be justified? The authors conclude that councils have the potential to become more influential in terms of organizational problem solving and reform, as well as promoting a ‘seamless’ relationship between schools and communities. They conclude, however, that this would require a dramatic shift in policies at all levels that would include placing these councils in much more than an advisory role. They argue that such a shift requires not only changes in policies, but the support of individual schools if they choose to pursue that sharing of responsibilities.

The results of the study are no surprise. In most of our experiences, parent councils have served primarily as fundraising organizations and have not had any input into the major educational decisions affecting schools or classrooms. Various councils are provided with information on accountability pillar results and long term school plans, but only as a more of a courtesy than an invitation for them to provide input into school and teaching practices. There is usually input into distribution of funds, but only in the manner of choosing from a list provided by school staff rather than initiating ideas for expenditures.

We are, generally, in agreement with the authors’ argument that school councils – although they have little effect classroom practices or student achievement – have a positive influence in that they increase communication between the community and school staff and give the teachers the feeling that they are being supported by their community in the work that they do. The goodwill created by this group of volunteers cannot be tangibly measured, but that does not diminish the positive impact on teachers doing the jobs in their classrooms.

The argument that school councils ‘do not matter’ when it comes to improving student achievement or changing classroom practices is, on the surface, a valid one given the study results and our own observations and experience. However, the data is limited by the fact that it was collected through surveys/interviews and those instruments have the potential to be more subjective than empirical. Student achievement scores are affected by myriad factors – many of them intangible – therefore, it is challenging to verify causal links between any initiative and student outcomes.

As we examine the question “What should be the role of parent councils?” we need

What roles should parent councils play? Perhaps we have expected them to play too great a role. Do we want to give them the power to affect practices?